

SMALL BUSINESS VENTURES
OF BLIND

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Small Business Ventures of Blind

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THE operation of vending stands can be profitable small business. Therefore, many returning veterans, particularly partially disabled men, are already thinking about operating candy and tobacco stands in factories and in office and public buildings, both as a means of livelihood and of adjustment to civilian life.

Some of these veterans undoubtedly will call upon organizations in which businessmen are interested to sponsor their ventures and back them financially. However, before launching or participating in any such program a businessman would do well to investigate the experience and management policies of the Washington Society for the Blind, which owns and supervises vending stands operated by blind persons in the District of Columbia—50 stands in Government buildings, and 9 on non-Government locations.

The society is a private, nonprofit, self-sustaining corporation governed by a board of directors made up of nine prominent Washington citizens who have formulated the policies on which the organization's success is built.

Keynote Is Supervision

Strict supervision is the keynote of the society's program. According to W. L. McDaniel, executive secretary, the method is one of central control by which the agency assumes full responsibility for the financial and business affairs of the stands and their operators. This method gives to qualified persons who enter the program a security and protection in the position, always with the incentive to improve their circumstances by promotion.

Selection and Training

The society's basic philosophy is that as it is an organization for the blind the caliber of stand operators must be very high. One poorly chosen or improperly placed operator can discredit the entire program. Accordingly, the operators must have at least an average background and must be well adjusted personally, physically able to perform their duties, and capable of benefiting by the training program.

Each new operator, before being put in charge of a location, is given an intensive training of from 3 to 8 weeks. During this period the operator works at a special stand maintained by the society and is paid a nominal wage. The stand is under the management of a fully sighted person who has complete responsibility for training the operators.

The initial step in the training program is the adjustment of the operator to his new environment. The sighted instructor first guides the operator to the

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closet where he is to keep his hat, coat, and personal belongings. Next, he walks with the operator to the most convenient rest room. En route he suggests that the operator count the number of steps and turns. No detail in the adjustment is overlooked, and very soon the operator feels perfectly at home.

Following this, intensive training in merchandising and in the maintenance of the stand is given. However, training does not end when the operator is put in charge of his own stand for, under the strict supervisory method of the society, training and education in sound merchandising principles are continuous.

Building Officials' Attitude

The society and its associate agency, Vocational Rehabilitation for the District of Columbia, make all of the arrangements and adjustments with the Public Buildings Administration for Government buildings, and with the owners or

managers of private locations. Furthermore, they handle all complaints or suggestions made by the operators and the officials and custodians of the buildings. In fact, one of the hard and fast rules for the operators is that all their dealings with the custodians must be through the society.

Prior to 1939, when the Washington Society for the Blind bought out the interests of another group, experiences with unsupervised stands had been so unsatisfactory that officials of the Public Buildings Administration flatly stated they did not believe that the blind and satisfactory stand operation went hand in hand. Today, thanks to the high quality of the stands as a result of strict, centralized control, this attitude is completely reversed.

Selling the Sellers

When it became apparent that there would be a shortage of merchandise for civilian use, and manufacturers and wholesalers started to allot goods, the society was advised to curtail operations to 60 percent of its pre-war program. This meant a 40-percent cut all down the line.

The primary job of the central office then became one of selling the sellers on the idea of giving the society and the stand operators all the merchandise they possibly could. The society had always insisted that the stand operators maintain a friendly and businesslike relationship with wholesale representatives. This policy, plus letters and phone calls to manufacturers and wholesalers,



One type of vending stand operated in a Washington building by the Washington Society for the Blind. An excellent example of how small business can operate to the advantage of the handicapped.

helped to produce the desired results and after a slight decline in sales the upward trend continued, reaching an all-time high of \$107,000 in one 4-week period.

Design of Stands

The stands are of modern design and uniform construction. Operators, as they show ability, are promoted to the more profitable stands. In some cases, operators are moved to smaller stands where the work is not as strenuous. Uniformity of design makes this procedure possible.

Basic Merchandise List

Through the central office each stand operator knows exactly what volume of business he can expect from various brands of merchandise. Using a point system to conceal their dollar volume operators know that of 6,000 points, 1,200 points will be in tobacco. Cigarettes alone account for 1,029 points, with one brand scoring 234 points. Candy accounts for 550 points; one well-known chocolate almond bar sells twice the amount of any other five-cent candy bar and represents 7.3 percent of the potential of all candy sales. Of the 750 points accounted for by milk, sweet milk in pints make up 290 points, and in half pints, 200 points, while buttermilk totals only 20. Of the 1,100 points accounted for by sandwiches, the 10-cent variety totals 1,050 points and 15-cent sandwiches, 50. One brand of soft drinks alone accounts for 700 out of 845 points.

Stand Supervision

Supervisors from the society check each stand at least once a week. Each Saturday the cash is collected. At the end of each 4-week period an accounting is rendered the stand operator and payment of his earnings made by the central office.

The supervisors check the stands according to an efficiency checking sheet supplied by the office. Included in the items that make up a possible perfect score of 2,500 points are the following:

Merchandise displayed according to selling merit, 100 points.

Displays clean and attractive, 100 points.

Coffee made according to formula approved by the office, 50 points.

Sugar dispensers clean—no caked sugar—spoons clean, 10 points.

Sales floor clean and dry inside and outside stands, 100 points.

Storage space clean, tracks of sliding doors clean, 25 points.

Cooling equipment—water clear and sweet, no scum around the edge, 30 points.

Stocks properly balanced, action taken on slow sellers and overstocks, 100 points.

Daily reports made out promptly and correctly, 50 points.

No smoking at or about the stand by manager or assistant, 100 points.

Public relations, 250 points are possible. Fifty points are given for a perfect score in each of the following:

(1) Friendly, cooperative attitude toward supervisory suggestions.

Thanksgiving Day

"Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the fourth Thursday of November in each year after the year 1941 be known as Thanksgiving Day, and is hereby made a legal public holiday to all intents and purposes . . ."—Public Law 379 approved December 26, 1941.

(2) Prompt and proper approach in response to customers.

(3) Consciousness of responsibility, as, for example, evidence of a desire to promote extension of the program. (The society feels that each blind operator has a personal responsibility to other blind people to show that this program can be a success.)

(4) Friendly and businesslike conduct with wholesale representatives.

(5) Personality, as evidenced by meeting and remembering persons, pleasant and correct telephone usage, and interest in self-improvement.

Society Owns All Stands

All equipment, merchandise, and petty cash at the stands are owned by the society, which provides complete insurance protection against personal injury and food poisoning, maintains and replaces equipment, and provides pest-extermination services. The society approves all sources of supply and makes all basic contracts.

How Stands Operate

All sales are for cash and all purchases are paid for on delivery. Each day a detailed report on a form furnished by the society is made out by the operator. Each week the accumulated daily reports, receipted bills for purchases, and cash in excess of the petty cash account are turned in to the society. At the end of each 4-week period a check and an accounting statement are given to each stand operator. The statement shows the cash turned in, sales, purchases, salaries paid by the society to full-time assistants and money advanced to the operator, and the operator's total earnings for the period.

The society, an organization for the blind that is entirely self-sustaining, derives its income from the administration charges to the stands, based on the following scale:

On the first \$400 of gross sales per period, 4 percent.

On the second \$400 of gross sales per period, 6 percent.

On the third \$400 of gross sales per period, 8 percent.

On gross sales above \$1,200 per period, 10 percent.

This sliding scale places the heaviest administration charges on the stands best able to carry them and enables the society to bring the earnings of the op-

erators of a few small stands to the \$30 per week guaranteed minimum wage.

The stand operators do all their buying from firms on the approved list. They are responsible for keeping adequate stocks on hand and for arranging and displaying merchandise. Operators have the authority for the supervision of their assistants and are responsible for their work. Each stand manager is rated according to the efficiency of his operation. All-stand averages are figured for percentages of gross profit, net profit, salary, and supplies; basic cost is established for each telephone. Any operator who does better than the five all-stand averages for the period is called a "5-star" operator. Promotion to better paying stands is made on the basis of superior operations.

Blindness is no respecter of persons or social position, as accidents and illnesses, among which diabetes and scarlet fever rank first, can strike in any group. Recognizing this fact, the society planned a program that takes into account the managerial experiences, educational background, family responsibilities, and financial needs of the operators. In the group are a former lawyer, preacher, electrician, co-conductor of a symphony orchestra, taxi driver, merchant, piano tuner, and several housewives. Net annual earnings per operator range from \$1,560, the guaranteed minimum, to approximately \$5,500, with the average in 1943 slightly over \$3,000. The total earnings of the blind operators will exceed \$207,000 during 1944, at the present rate of operations.

Results of Supervision

The phenomenal success and growth of the program, resulting from sound managerial policies, supervision, and central control, can be shown by a few figures. Late in 1939 the Washington Society for the Blind took over the stands; by 1942 the program showed the results of skillful direction, and the figures for 1944 show still further gains despite shortages of all kinds:

Item	1939 average, 4-week period	1942 average, 4-week period	1944 average for first 6 periods
Stands:			
Number of—			
Stands.....	16	40	58
Blind operators	14	40	66
Sighted employees	20	75	88
Income per period for blind operators.....	\$152.09	\$223.52	\$261.73
Central office:			
Number of—			
Clerical employees	1	5	9
Supervisors	1	3	5
Sales per period.....	\$14,843.32	\$90,748.63	\$105,521.93

Reputation Spreads

The blind of the District of Columbia are not the only persons to benefit from the program. During the past year 22 organizations for the blind have sought advice and assistance. The society has sent the blueprints and photographs of its stands, and copies of its daily, weekly,

and monthly report forms. Also, members have given generously of their time in showing visiting representatives of organizations for the blind the detailed workings of the stands.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Federal Security Agency, started on July 31 a series of 3-week courses to train men to install and supervise vending-stand programs in the 48 States. The facilities of the Washington Society for the Blind are being used, the trainees visiting and working at the stands. The executive secretary and staff members lecture to and lead discussion groups in which the trainees become thoroughly familiar with the forms and accounting system developed by the society. At these discussions the trainees meet with representatives of manufacturers and wholesalers.

Representatives of the Army from Old Farms Convalescent Hospital (Special),

Avon, Conn., where the men blinded during this war are sent for personal and social adjustment training; mental aptitude, skills, and interests testing; and actual prevocational job try-outs have arranged to visit the society and to work in the stands. And the Veterans' Administration, Vocational Rehabilitation and Educational Service, is incorporating the experiences, methods, and techniques of the society in its work with blind veterans.

Although the total annual sales volume might preclude the society from the category of small business, each of the 59 vending stands in the District of Columbia is definitely a small business unit. As in every other small enterprise the personality, skill, and interest of the operator are reflected in the financial statement. However, in view of the fact that blindness is often a serious handicap to a business manager and because most of

the stand operators have had little business experience, comprehensive training, strict supervision, and central control are necessary.

By acquiring their business experience under conditions made as favorable for them as possible, the operators gain in self-assurance and in initiative. While most operators stay in the society, one operator launched his own system of stands in an eastern city. Benefiting by the experience and training he received as a member of the society, his stands were extremely successful.

It would be the most doubtful type of kindness to put a severely handicapped person, particularly if he is blind, into a business and let him swim or sink. Therefore, the society performs for the operators all those functions which require sight. And the operators want this supervision.

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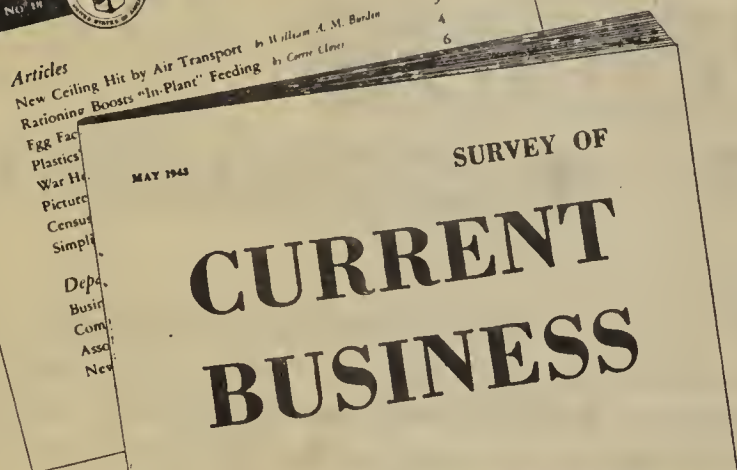
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